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Ex-US officer saw Barbie questioned

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PITTSBURG, Calif. - A former US counterintelligence officer says he witnessed the interrogation of an arrogant, taunting Klaus Barbie by French investigators who were hostile to the Gestapo chief after World War II.

John Willms says he escorted Barbie to three days of interrogation by French agents in the spring of 1946, and stood by, armed, to prevent the French from killing the man accused of torturing and killing resistance leader Jean Moulin and thousands of other people.

He said French officers tried to get Barbie to reveal who betrayed Moulin, but Barbie wouldn't break.

"They were ready to tear him apart," Willms said.

"I'd say the guy was taunting the French," Willms said of Barbie. Safe in the custody of the US Army, "he felt so secure he would give them smart answers."

Barbie, the Gestapo chief of Lyon during the German occupation, was expelled Feb. 5 from Bolivia, where he had lived since the war, and was flown to France for trial on charges of crimes against humanity.

In Paris yesterday, the newspaper Liberation reprinted excerpts from an interview Barbie gave 11 years ago to Bolivian journalist Ewaldo Dants Ferreira of the O Estado de Sao Paulo newspaper.

Barbie admitted he ordered the execution of a group of nuns after an arms cache was discovered at their Lyon convent.

"The nuns were imprisoned," he said in the interview. "I don't remember whether they were executed, but it seems to me they were. Yes, now I remember, they were executed."

Barbie said a number of women resistance fighters were captured and often tortured by men working under his orders.

"The woman held out well for 48 hours," he said of a radio operator captured in a special Gestapo operation. "She never talked at all. She was brave and my men gave up."

The Gestapo chief said he personally disposed of the body of another woman fighter, shot after she killed a Gestapo officer in an ambush.

"The woman died after admitting she was a resistance agent and had received an order to organize this operation," he said. "I ordered her execution and then to cover up our tracks I threw her body into the Rhone."

Barbie said establishing his commando team in Lyon was "difficult," but the collaboration of Frenchmen sympathetic towards their Nazi occupiers made his task easier.